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DESERT MONASTICISM AND THE LATER FOURTH-CENTURY PSALMODIC MOVEMENT

BY JAMES W. MCKINNON

ST ANTONY, a Christian ascetic of Alexandria, left the city in about 285 to live in the desert as a hermit.¹ After some twenty years of solitary existence—solitary but for his confrontations with demons—he organized a number of other hermits into a loosely knit community; at that moment, one might say, the institution of Christian monasticism was born.² Not long afterwards, Pachomius, the second great monastic founder, established the first of his several monasteries along the Upper Nile, near Thebes, some 250 miles south of the Lower Egyptian settlements begun by Antony. The monks under Pachomius' charge lived in common quarters, the so-called coenobitic mode familiar to us from later Western monasticism, while those in Lower Egypt continued for some time to favour the eremitical or anchoritic mode established by Antony, that is, living as hermits in close proximity to a charismatic master.

Monasticism spread rapidly from its Egyptian cradle to the deserts of Palestine and Syria, or such is the traditional view as provided by Jerome; he cited Hilarion (d. 371), a native of Gaza and a disciple of Antony, as the patriarch of both Palestinian and Syrian monasticism. One can well imagine, however, that the wilderness between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, the desert home of Elijah and the Qumran community, might have attracted isolated Christian ascetics before the broad fourth-century movement. As for Syria, we now know that the Mesopotamian area saw the beginnings of its own monastic movement at least as early as Antony's efforts and completely independent of them.³ Nevertheless, it was Egyptian monasticism that came to dominate the imagination of Christianity in the second half of the fourth century, to the extent that even the Syrians were led to believe in the Egyptian origins of their monasticism.

One of the truly remarkable aspects of Egyptian monasticism was the number of individuals involved; they made 'of the desert a city', in the phrase of Antony's biographer Athanasius. Chroniclers from later in the fourth century speak of as many as 5,000 desert monks at Nitria, the principal Lower Egyptian site, and an even greater number at Pachomius' Tabennesis in Upper Egypt. What motivated so many to choose a life of such singular rigour remains something of a mystery. From a spiritual point of view, and as Athanasius tells of Antony, they simply obeyed the precept of Jesus to 'go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have

¹ The primary source for Antony's life is the celebrated biography of Athanasius; for a translation, see *Athanasius: the Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg, London, 1980. René Draguet (*La Vie primitive de S. Antoine conservée en syriaque*, Louvain, 1980) has argued that Athanasius' work is based on an earlier Coptic biography of Antony.

² The best survey of desert monasticism remains Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City*, Oxford, 1966; what follows here is largely dependent on it.

³ On the origins of Syriac monasticism, see Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, Louvain, 1958, i. 138–46.

treasure in heaven; and come follow me' (Mark 10: 21). But there must have been external reasons why the movement began when and where it did. Jerome saw it as a reaction to persecution: the faithful fled to the desert so that they could practise their religion in freedom. More plausible to modern historians is the notion that idealistic souls sought the return to a pristine form of Christianity in the face of the widespread laxity that resulted from mass conversions both before and after Constantine's emancipation of the Church in 313. The deserts south of Alexandria were a natural location for this: Alexandria and its environs housed the largest Christian population of the late third century, and life in the nearby desert, while arduous, was survivable.

In any case, this extraordinary movement did take place, and as my title suggests, my contention is that it can be linked to the notion of a later fourth-century 'psalmodic movement', an unprecedented wave of enthusiasm for the singing of psalms that swept from east to west through the Christian population in the closing decades of the fourth century. On the face of it, it might seem incongruous to link something so positive with the austere beginnings of monasticism, but I hope to show that early Christian monasticism made an essential contribution to the later fourth-century flowering of ecclesiastical song.

St Paul admonished the Thessalonians to 'pray without ceasing' (I Thess. 5: 17). This seemingly impractical ideal was routinely invoked throughout the first Christian centuries, but the desert monks embraced it with simple literalness. They sought to maintain a constant sense of the divine presence, a meditative state nourished by prayer, manual labour, fasting and, not least, psalmody.⁴ The type of psalmody they employed was a particularly effective device for such a purpose: it was psalmody 'in course', or 'continuous' psalmody, that is, the recitation at one sitting of large portions of the Psalter in order, and occasionally the entire Psalter from beginning to end.

In trying to imagine what this psalmody was like from a musical point of view, we must not confuse it with the well-regulated choral psalmody of Western medieval monasticism. It was an aid to the meditation of an individual rather than a corporate act of praise, more private prayer than public liturgy. For example, we read of Abba John 'that while returning from the harvest or from meeting the elders, he devoted himself to prayer, meditation, and psalmody until he had restored his mind to its original order'.⁵ Antony demonstrated to an old man eager to embrace the anchoritic life just what it would entail: he arose at night 'and said twelve prayers and chanted twelve psalms; next he lay down for his brief first sleep and arose once more in the middle of the night to chant psalms until it was day'. He then said to the old man: 'If you can do this every day, then remain with me'.⁶ And we are told that Elpidius partook 'of food only on the Lord's Day and the Sabbath, standing throughout the night and reciting psalms'; one night while changing he was bitten

⁴ On the general spirit of early monastic prayer, see Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1986, pp. 66–72; I rely heavily on this magisterial study of the early Office. Another excellent recent survey, if somewhat narrower in scope, is Paul F. Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer in the Early Church*, London, 1981. Among the several scholars who helped to make Taft's and Bradshaw's work possible, special mention should be made of Juan Mateos, at least three of whose publications have directly influenced my own work: 'L'Office monastique à la fin du IV^e siècle: Antioche, Palestine, Cappadoce', *Oriens Christianus*, xlvi (1963), 53–88; 'La Psalmodie dans le rite byzantin', *Proche-Orient chrétien*, xv (1965), 107–26; and 'The Origin of the Divine Office', *Worship*, xli (1967), 477–85.

⁵ *Apophthegmata patrum*, Ioannes Curtius 35; No. 125 in James W. McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, Cambridge, 1987 (henceforth *MECL*), p. 62.

⁶ *Lausiac History* xxii (*MECL*, No. 118).

by a scorpion, but he simply ‘stepped on it without altering his posture, paying no heed to the pain’.⁷

As the fourth century progressed, the desert monks came to participate in what might properly be called an Office.⁸ Two times each day were singled out for special dedication to prayer and psalmody, the morning and evening, times sanctified in Christian tradition and in Judaism as well. For the desert monks, morning meant the hour of cockcrow, with several hours of darkness remaining, while the evening was actually late afternoon, following the principal meal of the day. Again, we should not picture the carefully regulated psalmody of medieval choir monks at these gatherings. Much of the individuality of private psalmody was maintained. Each psalm was recited by an elder while the rank-and-file monks, mostly simple illiterate men, sat in prayerful silence, their hands occupied in the tasks that supported them—plaiting rope, weaving baskets and the like. After each psalm, or portion of a longer psalm, a prayer was said, for example the Lord’s Prayer; the monks very likely would have stood for this, thereafter prostrating themselves in silent prayer for a period of time. All this becomes highly formalized in later descriptions such as in Cassian’s early fifth-century *De institutis*, where he attempted to adapt the practices of the Egyptian desert to the regimen of the Gallican monks and nuns under his charge.⁹ What is certain about the authentic Egyptian Office is the continuous psalmody, interspersed with prayer and sustained for extended periods of time in an effort to maintain a state of meditation.¹⁰

While these morning and evening gatherings were held every day in the coenobitic monasteries of the Upper Nile, the anchorites of Lower Egypt met in common only on Saturdays and Sundays; on weekdays they observed the appointed times in their own cells. ‘They came together only on Saturday and Sunday’, explains the *History of the Monks of Egypt*; ‘many of them who die in their cells are not found for four days’.¹¹ Palladius (d. 425), who recounts his late fourth-century observations of desert monasticism in the *Lausiac History*, gives us a hint of what the private weekday evening Office might have been like at Nitria in Lower Egypt: ‘one who stands there at about the ninth hour can hear the psalmody issuing forth from each cell, so that he imagines himself to be high above in paradise’.¹² Of course, what sounded heavenly to Palladius might by narrowly musical standards have been cacophonous, with each monk chanting in his own way and his own time. But even the most secularly inclined of moderns should be able to imagine themselves stirred by the religious resonance of such a scene; and, more to the point, the chanting of certain individual monks might itself have manifested a kind of unselfconscious beauty.

⁷ *Lausiac History* xlviii (MECL, No. 120).

⁸ On the Office of desert monasticism, see Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, pp. 57–73; idem, ‘Praise in the Desert: the Coptic Monastic Office Yesterday and Today’, *Worship*, lvi (1982), 513–36.

⁹ See Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, p. 60.

¹⁰ This is true for Sundays at the very least. And even if one accepts Taft’s contention (*ibid.*, pp. 64–65) that from Monday to Saturday the Pachomian monks recited Scripture readings rather than psalms at the morning Office, the fact remains that they chanted psalms in private before the common meeting (see *ibid.*, pp. 63, 66). Joseph Dyer (‘Monastic Psalmody of the Middle Ages’, *Revue bénédictine*, ic (1989), 41–74, at pp. 46–49) takes a similar position on the exclusion of psalmody from the weekday Pachomian Office: both Taft and Dyer in fact rely on Armand Veilleux, *La Liturgie dans le cénobitisme Pachômien au quatrième siècle* (‘*Studia Anselmiana*’, Ivii), Rome, 1968, pp. 324–30; Veilleux argues that a key phrase in an important early Coptic description of the Pachomian Office reads ‘six times’, not ‘six prayers and psalms’, as Jerome has it in a later translation. But surely it would be concentrating on the tree and ignoring the forest to conclude from this passage that psalmody was not central to the Office, communal and private, of desert monasticism: in addition to the passages cited above and below, see MECL, Nos. 104–6, 111–15, 119, 127–8, 336–7, 344.

¹¹ Given in Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, p. 61.

¹² *Lausiac History* vii (MECL, No. 117).

The very individuality of this chanting and the widely varying degrees of natural musical ability on the part of those involved would have guaranteed widely differing results. But the overall style and manner of this psalmody must have been primitive and austere; its use as an aid to meditation and the great severity of the monastic life would certainly have ensured this. In any case, there is no mention of the melodic attractiveness of desert monastic psalmody in any of the many references to it in the authentic fourth-century sources. And equally telling, there are no complaints against musical excess in the same literature. The story related in the first item of Gerbert's *Scriptores ecclesiastici*, of how Abba Pambo reproaches a young monk for being impressed with the 'canons' and 'troparia' of the Alexandrian churches, is apocryphal; it does not appear in the authentic sayings of Pambo and has the appearance of being from the sixth century, when one might well expect to hear that sort of thing from an Eastern monk.¹³ But austerity aside, the simple existence of monastic psalmody 'in course' is what is at issue here; it was a psalmody that moved psalm by psalm through the Psalter, rather than selecting appropriate psalms, and one that was pervasive in monastic life rather than occasional. For a final example, one could do worse than turn to the anecdote told of the venerable Abba Serapion. One day as he walked through a nearby village, he stopped at the place of a prostitute and asked her to prepare for his visit that evening. When he returned, he told her that they must wait 'a moment' while he performed his Office. The holy man then proceeded to chant the entire Psalter, during the course of which the woman recognized his pious subterfuge; she was filled with remorse and subsequently devoted her life to the pursuit of virtue.¹⁴

Desert monasticism captured the imagination of Christendom in the second half of the fourth century. A host of eminent ecclesiastical figures visited Egypt to admire and study the heroic lives of the monks and nuns in residence there. Among those who came were Basil, Jerome, Cassian, Rufinus, Paula, Palladius and Evagarius of Pontus, a veritable '*Who's Who* of the early church'.¹⁵ They helped to foster the dramatic development of monasticism as it spread from east to west, and from the deserts to the cities. Virtually every outstanding Christian personality of the later fourth century—men of the stature of Augustine, Jerome, Basil, John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nyssa—lived as monks at one time or another during their careers, whether they had visited Egypt or not. Virtually the only exception was Ambrose, who was a public official up to the time of his appointment as bishop, and he, too, came to write admiringly of monasticism and to foster its existence in his diocese.¹⁶ Christian spirituality became synonymous with the monastic way of life. When Jerome offered spiritual advice to pious widows and their daughters in Rome, he advocated simply the monastic horarium. St Augustine's conversion took place on the very day that a Christian acquaintance, Pontitian, had spoken to him of Athanasius' life of Antony, a conversation that moved him deeply.¹⁷

¹³ The anecdote has been used by no less a scholar than Johannes Quasten to show that the early desert monks were consciously opposed to elaborate psalmody; see *Music and Worship in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, Washington, DC, 1983, pp. 94–95. On the origins of the anecdote, see Otto Wesseley, 'Die Musikanschauung des Abtes Pambo', *Anzeiger der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften: philosophisch-historische Klasse*, lxxxix (1952), 45–62.

¹⁴ *Apophthegmata patrum*, Serapion 1 (MECL, No. 126).

¹⁵ Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, p. 76.

¹⁶ See Augustine, *The Confessions* VIII, vi, 15; Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 49; Ambrose, *Hexaemeron* III, v, 23 (MECL, No. 289).

¹⁷ See *The Confessions* VIII, vi–xii.

And the hallmark of monasticism remained psalmody; no invocation of the monastic way of life could fail to mention it. John Chrysostom, who lived as a monk in Antioch from about 373 to 380, reflected that experience when he wrote: ‘As soon as they are up, they stand and sing the prophetic hymns . . . Neither cithara, nor syrinx, nor any other musical instrument emits such sound as is to be heard in the deep silence and solitude of those holy men as they sing.’¹⁸ Basil, writing to his friend Gregory of Nazianzus, recommended the attractions of his monastic retreat at Pontus: ‘What is more blessed than to imitate the chorus of angels here on earth; to arise for prayer at the very break of day and honour the Creator with hymns and songs?’¹⁹ When spiritual advisers advocated a monastic way of life to their charges, they emphasized the role of psalmody. Jerome wrote of Paula that ‘when still tender her tongue must be imbued with sweet psalms’,²⁰ and of Pacatula, ‘Let her learn the Psalter by heart’,²¹ while Gregory of Nyssa said of his young sister Macrina, in the biography he composed after her saintly death, ‘Everywhere she had psalmody with her, like a good companion which one forsakes not for a moment’.²² And finally, the stirring paean to Davidic psalmody attributed to John Chrysostom concludes:

In the monasteries there is a holy chorus of angelic hosts, and David is first, middle, and last. In the convents there are bands of virgins who imitate Mary, and David is first, middle, and last. In the deserts men crucified to this world hold converse with God, and David is first, middle, and last. And at night all men are dominated by physical sleep and drawn into the depths, and David alone stands by, arousing all the servants of God to angelic vigils, turning earth into heaven and making angels of men.²³

Such expressions of admiration for monastic psalmody might of themselves constitute evidence for the proposition that monasticism played a role in the rise of the later fourth-century psalmodic movement, but there is a much more tangible form of evidence. It is possible to observe in the sources the direct influence of urban monastic psalmody on two Christian institutions of central importance: the daily ecclesiastical Office and the popular psalmodic vigil.

The first Office Hours to develop in the urban ecclesiastical centres of the fourth century were, as in monasticism, a morning and an evening service. The morning and evening had ancient sanction as times especially consecrated to religion; this was the case in Judaism, and also in the primitive Church, although here it was a matter more of private than of public observance.²⁴ After the emancipation of the

¹⁸ In *I Timotheum*, Homily xiv, 3–4 (*MECL*, No. 187).

¹⁹ Epistle II, 2 (*MECL*, No. 138).

²⁰ Epistle CVII, 4 (*MECL*, No. 322).

²¹ Epistle CXXVIII, 4 (*MECL*, No. 330). See also Epistle CVII, 12 (*MECL*, No. 326).

²² *Life of Macrina* 3 (*MECL*, No. 151).

²³ *De poenitentia* (*MECL*, No. 195). See also (in addition to the passages from Egeria given below) *MECL*, Nos. 146, 152, 180, 188–9, 196–9, 289, 294–5, 300, 327, 336–50, 375, 379, 387.

²⁴ On the pre-history of the morning and evening services, see Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, pp. 3–29, and Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer in the Early Church*, pp. 47–71. They both reject the view, widely held at one time, that the morning and evening services were conducted publicly from Apostolic times and also continued directly from similar synagogue services; this view is associated primarily with Clifford W. Dugmore, *The Influence of the Synagogue upon the Divine Office*, London, 1944, pp. 42–58. It has been further undermined by studies that question the very existence of regularized synagogue services at the period in question; see James W. McKinnon, ‘On the Question of Psalmody in the Ancient Synagogue’, *Early Music History*, vi (1986), 159–81; and Stefan C. Reif, ‘The Early History of Jewish Worship’, *The Making of Jewish and Christian Worship*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw & Laurence A. Hoffman, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1991, pp. 109–36. Indeed, Bradshaw now questions the conventional view that the morning and evening were the two principal times of prayer before the fourth century; see *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, Oxford, 1991, pp. 190–92. He and his pupil Edward Phillips have developed the argument that three times rather than two were favoured in the earlier centuries: some communities advocated morning, noon and evening, and others the third, sixth and ninth hours. The two traditions were eventually conflated in the fivefold pattern cited by Tertullian and Cyprian.

Church in 313, however, public morning and evening Offices became normalized to constitute the so-called ‘cathedral Office’ of the fourth century.²⁵ It varied in detail from city to city, but displayed a broadly homogeneous shape of ceremony, prayer, psalmody and episcopal blessing. In the morning, a careful selection of psalms was sung, always including Psalm 62, ‘Oh God my God, I rise before thee at the break of day’;²⁶ in several liturgies, the ‘Gloria in excelsis’ was also sung, while virtually all of them concluded with intercessory prayers and the blessing of the bishop. At some point in the fourth century (whether earlier or later is disputed) were added Psalms 148–50, the set of alleluia psalms that would eventually become the Lauds psalms *par excellence*. The evening service opened with the *lucernarium*, the ceremony of lamp-lighting, which was accompanied in some localities by ‘Phos hilaron’, the hymn that celebrates Jesus Christ as light. The obligatory psalm of the evening service was Psalm 140, with its appropriate second verse, ‘Let my prayer be directed to thee as incense, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice’.²⁷ Incidentally, John Chrysostom suggested that the faithful knew this psalm and its morning counterpart, Psalm 62, by heart.²⁸ The evening service frequently included a ceremony of incensation, while it was generally completed, like the morning service, with intercessory prayers and the bishop’s blessing.

The attempt to make its services appropriate to the time of day was characteristic of the entire cathedral Office. There was the *lucernarium* at the evening Office, for example, and, more to the present point, the carefully selected morning and evening psalms. These stand in sharp contrast to the continuous psalmody of the monastic Office, and this enables one to distinguish between the respective contributions of the monastic and the cathedral Offices to the hybrid Offices described in late fourth- and early fifth-century sources.²⁹ It can be said that the cathedral Office was imbued with the continuous psalmody of monasticism; the results are clearly visible throughout the liturgical day—in the morning, during the daytime Hours, and in the evening.

In the morning, as we have seen, there was a single service in both the monastic and the cathedral Offices. The services had little in common aside from the fact that they can loosely be described as morning Offices: they differ greatly in their character and actually took place at distinctly different times. The monastic Office, as an extended period of psalmody, meditation and prayer, was in reality a nocturnal Office that began several hours before daybreak, while the cathedral Office was a briefer service of praise conducted in the early daylight. In the hybrid urban Office of the later fourth century, they were combined, at least in some localities, in a unique way by the simple expedient of retaining both and performing them successively, with the monastic psalmodic vigil followed by the cathedral service of praise: this pattern is still recognizable in the Western medieval Matins and Lauds.³⁰

²⁵ On the cathedral Office, see Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, pp. 31–56, and Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer in the Early Church*, 72–91, 111–23.

²⁶ The numbering of the psalms used here is that of the Greek and Latin tradition; translations are based on the Septuagint.

²⁷ This is true of the East at least; in the West, Psalm 103 might have occupied a similar position. See Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, p. 188.

²⁸ *In psalmum cxl, i* (MECL, No. 171).

²⁹ On the hybrid monastic–cathedral Office of the later fourth century, see Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, pp. 75–91. W. Jardine Grisbrooke, ‘The Formative Period—Cathedral and Monastic Offices’, in Cheslyn Jones *et al.*, *The Study of Liturgy*, rev. edn., London, 1992, pp. 403–20, is also a particularly cogent account of the phenomenon.

³⁰ It is recognizable, but not so obviously, in the more complex Byzantine morning Office; see Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, pp. 277–83. There are other patterns; for a summary, see Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, pp. 191–2.

Egeria's description of the Office at Jerusalem illustrates this vividly. First there was the monastic vigil in the great Constantinian church of the Anastasis:

Each day before cockcrow, all the doors of the Anastasis are opened, and all the *monazontes* and *parthenae*, as they are called here, come down, and not only they, but also those lay people, men and women, who wish to keep vigil at so early an hour. From that hour until it is light, hymns are sung and psalms responded to, and likewise antiphons; and with every hymn there is a prayer. For two or three priests, and likewise deacons, who say these prayers with every hymn and antiphon, take turns to be there each day with the *monazontes*.³¹

The psalmody was performed exclusively by the monks and nuns, and while laity were present, as one might expect in a great centre of pilgrimage, the bishop was not: this point clearly marks the service as essentially monastic in character. However, a few priests and deacons were assigned each day in rotation to recite the interspersed prayers, and thereby to provide, it would appear, a sort of ecclesiastical sanction for the service. Egeria's description continues with the second service: 'As soon as it begins to grow light, they start to sing the morning hymns, and behold the bishop arrives with the clergy'.³² The service continued with a series of prayers led by the bishop and concluded with his blessing. These are cathedral elements, as described above, and one notes the presence of the bishop and clergy for the entire service. Moreover, the phrase 'morning hymns', with its tone of specificity, would appear to refer not to continuous psalmody but to the special morning psalms such as Psalms 62 and 148–50.

In the course of the day, the monastic contribution was to provide a series of shorter Offices, made up chiefly of continuous psalmody, at the third, sixth and ninth hours. These times, like the morning and the evening, had sanction in both the Old Testament (Dan. 6: 10) and the New (Acts 2: 15; 10: 9; 3: 1) as times especially dedicated to prayer. They were observed as such in private, again as in the morning and evening, by many during the first centuries of Christianity, and they became established finally as communal Office Hours in Palestinian and Syrian monasteries of the mid fourth century.³³ A traditionalist like Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403) looked upon this tendency to designate specific times for prayer as something of a retreat from the original ideals of monasticism because 'the true monk must have prayer and psalmody in his heart without ceasing'.³⁴ Cassian, too, saw it as 'tempering the perfection of the Egyptians and the inimitable reign of their discipline . . . for they perform manual labor constantly while alone in their cells in such a way that meditation upon the psalms and other Scripture is never altogether omitted'.³⁵ Still, Terce, Sext and None came to be observed all but universally in monasteries of the later fourth century, and in many cathedrals as well. In Egeria's Jerusalem, Terce was reserved for Lent, but Sext and None were celebrated throughout the year:

Again at the sixth hour all come down to the Anastasis in the same way, and sing psalms and antiphons until the bishop is called in. He likewise comes down . . . and again he first says a prayer, then blesses the faithful . . . And at the ninth hour they do the same as at the sixth.³⁶

³¹ *Itinerarium Egeriae* xxiv, 1 (MECL, No. 242).

³² *Itinerarium Egeriae* xxiv, 2 (MECL, No. 242).

³³ See Cassian, *De institutis* iii, 1 (MECL, No. 344).

³⁴ *Apophthegmata patrum*, Epiphanius 3 (MECL, No. 124).

³⁵ *De institutis* iii, 2 (MECL, No. 345).

³⁶ *Itinerarium Egeriae* xxiv, 3 (MECL, No. 244).

The principal evening Office is more clearly what one might call a hybrid. It began with the traditional cathedral element of the *lucernarium*, accompanied by its special chants; there was, after all, the practical necessity of illuminating the building. But the bulk of the service's earlier portion was made up of continuous psalmody, and the latter portion by cathedral elements presided over by the bishop, a pattern still broadly observable in Western medieval Vespers with its prelude of five psalms, sung in numerical order, followed by a diverse grouping of prayers and chants. Egeria, again, provides the most concrete description:

But at the tenth hour—what they call here *lucinicon*, and what we call *lucernare*—the entire throng gathers again at the Anastasis, and all the lamps and candles are lit, producing a boundless light . . . And the *psalmi lucernares*, as well as antiphons, are sung for a long time. And behold the bishop is called and comes down and takes the high seat, while the priests also sit in their places, and hymns and antiphons are sung. And when these have been finished according to custom, the bishop arises . . .³⁷

As in the morning, the service continued with prayers, including a litany, and concluded with the bishop's blessing, given separately this time, to catechumens and to the faithful. The day closed with this elaborate vesperal service in most of the ecclesiastical centres of the later fourth century, although a brief gathering of monks and nuns for a final period of psalmody, a sort of proto-Compline, was observed in a few locations.³⁸

What is clear from Egeria's description of the entire day is the distinction between the monastic contribution of continuous psalmody and the traditional cathedral elements, a distinction underlined by the presence or absence of the bishop. I have chosen this description as paradigmatic for the simple reason that there is no other source to match it in concreteness and specificity, particularly in relating which elements of the Office were performed by monks, laity, clergy and bishop respectively. However, there is sufficient material from other centres—particularly Chrysostom's Antioch and Basil's Caesarea—to form a relatively clear picture of their daily Offices. To be sure, there are differences between them; for example, Robert Taft characterizes the Offices of Palestine and Antioch as 'a monastic cursus that has absorbed cathedral elements', and, conversely, that of Cappadocia as 'a cathedral cursus onto which monastic hours have been grafted'.³⁹ But however one explains the mixture, the nature of the monastic contribution remains unmistakable; it is no exaggeration to describe it as the imbuing of the cathedral Office with continuous psalmody.

The second tangible contribution of monasticism to later fourth-century Christian psalmody was the rise of the popular psalmodic vigil. Vigils of various sorts were observed in Christianity well before the later fourth century.⁴⁰ There is, to start with, something about the religious psychology of the vigil that transcends the limits of any particular chronological period or religious persuasion, a sense of purity, awe and mystery that accompanies arising in the cool, dark silence of the night to pray. Moreover, early Christians had the examples both of David—who sang 'I remembered thee in my bed, I meditated on thee at the break of day' (Ps. 62: 6)—and of

³⁷ *Itinerarium Egeriae* xxiv, 4–6 (MECL, No. 245).

³⁸ For example, in Basil's Caesarea; see Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, pp. 86–87.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁴⁰ On Christian vigils, see especially Josef Jungmann, 'The Origins of Matins', in *idem*, *Pastoral Liturgy*, New York, 1962, pp. 105–22.

Paul and Silas, who prayed and sang in the prison at Thyatira during the middle of the night (Acts 16: 25). We can see that they took such examples to heart from a remark of Tertullian about the Christian wife of a pagan husband: ‘Can she hide the fact that she rises from bed at midnight to pray?’⁴¹ In addition to such private vigils, there were public vigils as well. Tertullian, speaking again of that determined Christian wife, mentions the earliest and most important of these, the Easter vigil: ‘Will her husband put up with her absence the whole night through while she is attending the Paschal celebrations?’⁴² On the eve of Easter, the candidates for baptism, accompanied by the faithful, spent the entire night listening to reading and instruction in final preparation for their reception into the Church on Easter morning.

Another occasion for vigils was the night before the celebration of a particular martyr’s festival. We read of abuses at these vigils in the fourth century: they were observed not in church but outdoors at the martyr’s shrine and could easily become the occasion of unregulated merry-making. Basil speaks of ‘licentious women’ who ‘shake their hair’ and ‘form a dancing troop in the martyrs’ shrines before the city, making of those holy places a worship of their characteristic indecency, defiling the air with their harlot’s songs’.⁴³ Another factor occasioning abuses at the martyr vigils was that the participants would proceed to the place of observance immediately after the evening meal, already, one imagines, in a mood for less restrained celebration. But for the sort of vigil that is at issue here—the popular psalmodic vigil—the faithful were required to rise from their beds hours before dawn, to proceed fasting to the church, and generally to celebrate the Eucharist afterwards.

It is Egeria, once more, who provides a particularly clear description of this vigil. On Sunday morning, the nocturnal monastic Office described above was not held. In its place, the people themselves performed something remarkably similar:

On the seventh day, that is, the Lord’s Day, all the people gather before cockcrow, as at Easter, as many as possible in that place, the basilica, which is located next to the Anastasis, yet out of doors where lamps are held for the occasion . . . Hymns are sung and also antiphons, and there are prayers with each hymn and antiphon. For priests and deacons are always prepared for vigils in that place because of the crowd which gathers.⁴⁴

This is a striking instance of the influence of monastic psalmody upon the laity: early on Sunday morning, the people did precisely what they had observed the monks and nuns doing on the other days of the week, while the clergy performed the same function of providing the interspersed prayers.

Among the most vivid descriptions of psalmody at a vigil is the oft-quoted passage from Basil’s letter to the clergy of Neocaesarea, written in the year 375. In it, he defends the ascetics under his wing against certain accusations made against them—in particular, presumed improprieties in the manner of their psalm singing. He prefers not to call these individuals monks and nuns; rather, they are men and women who live a quasi-monastic life in the Caesarean community in order, presumably, to inspire the general faithful with their example. They are mere children, he says, compared to the famous men of Egypt, Palestine and Syria, but brave souls, nevertheless, who ‘have crucified their flesh with its affections and desires’, and who ‘sing hymns to our God unceasingly, while they work with their own

⁴¹ *Ad uxorem* ii, 5.

⁴² *Ad uxorem* ii, 4.

⁴³ *Homilia in ebriosos* 1 (*MECL*, No. 142).

⁴⁴ *Itinerarium Egeriae* xxiv, 8 (*MECL*, No. 247).

hands'. He then asserts that the psalmodic vigils of his congregation are no different from those practised in other churches.

Concerning that complaint about psalmody, with which our accusers have intimidated the simpler souls especially, I have this to say: that our customs as now established are in full accord and harmony with all the churches of God. Among us the people arise at night and go to the house of prayer; in pain, distress, and anguished tears they make confession to God, and finally getting up from prayer they commence the singing of psalms. At first they divide themselves into two groups and sing psalms in alternation with each other, at once intensifying their carefulness over the sacred texts, and focusing their attention and freeing their hearts from distraction. And then they entrust the lead of the chant to one person, while the rest sing in response. After thus spending the night in a variety of psalmody with interspersed prayer, now that the light of day has appeared, all in common as if from one mouth and one heart offer the psalm of confession to the Lord, while each fashions his personal words of repentance. Now if you shun us because of these practices, you will shun the Egyptians, you will shun the Libyans as well, and the Thebans, Palestinians, Arabians, Phoenicians, Syrians, and those who live by the Euphrates; and indeed all those among whom vigils, prayers, and common psalmody are esteemed.⁴⁵

For many music historians, the chief point of interest here is the reference to the singing of psalms by choirs in alternation, a practice which they identify, rightly or wrongly, with so-called antiphonal psalmody. My present concern, however, is with the larger phenomenon of the popular psalmodic vigil, and the involvement in it of local quasi-monastic communities. It is significant that Basil finds it necessary to justify this sort of vigil to the Neocaesarean clergy, suggesting the relative novelty of the practice, and that he cites only Eastern localities in his claim that the custom was virtually universal.

However, it was in the West, just a decade later, that the most frequently recounted example of a popular psalmodic vigil took place; the event, best known from Augustine's description in the *Confessions*, took place in Ambrose's Milan in the year 386. At the time, Ambrose, along with the faithful (including Augustine's mother, Monica), was prevented from leaving the city's basilica because of guards posted outside by the Arian empress dowager, Justina:

Not long since had the church of Milan begun this mode of consolation and exhortation, with the brethren singing together with voice and heart . . . At that time the custom began that hymns and psalms be sung after the manner of the eastern regions lest the people be worn out with the tedium of sorrow. The practice has been retained from that time until today and imitated by many, indeed, by almost all your congregations throughout the rest of the world.⁴⁶

Musical and liturgical historians alike have tended to miss the broad significance of this passage. They have focused on a narrow reading of the phrase 'after the manner of the eastern regions', taking it to refer to antiphonal psalmody. The most obvious difficulty with this interpretation is that the passage does not mention antiphonal psalmody. Moreover, it seems unlikely that Augustine would have placed such emphasis on a musical technicality rather than on some larger consideration. The event occurred in 386, little more than a decade after Basil had defended the prolonged night-time singing of his people at Neocaesarea, and the more plausible meaning of the passage is that Augustine refers simply to the practice of spending the night in the singing of psalms, an Eastern custom not yet common in the West.

⁴⁵ Epistle CCVII, 3 (*MECL*, No. 139).

⁴⁶ *Confessions* IX, vii, 15 (*MECL*, No. 351).

We are left with the same impression by the remarkable pair of sermons preached by Augustine's contemporary, Niceta, Bishop of Remesiana (present-day Bela Palanka in Serbia). The first sermon, *De vigiliis* ('On Vigils'), is a defence of the Saturday and Sunday morning pre-Eucharistic vigil against certain unnamed rigorists. Niceta closes with a promise to devote an entire sermon to the subject of psalmody; the subsequent work, *De psalmodiae bono* ('On the Benefit of Psalmody') is an extraordinary defence of congregational psalmody, and indeed, a summation of the entire orthodox Christian position on ecclesiastical song. The relevance of the two sermons to the Augustinian passage is obvious: Niceta found it necessary to defend not a particular style such as antiphonal psalmody but the entire custom of psalmodic vigils, presumably a relative novelty.⁴⁷ And Ambrose's own description of that night in Milan confirms the broad rather than the narrow interpretation: 'I was not able to return home, because the soldiers surrounded the basilica, keeping it under guard; we recited psalms with the brethren in the lesser basilica of the church'.⁴⁸ There is no mention of antiphonal psalmody here, whereas the more general consideration that psalms were sung was deemed significant enough to merit inclusion in a minimally brief reference to the occasion.

The term *antiphona* was finally associated with the event in the biography of Ambrose written by his secretary, Paulinus, in 422: 'At this time antiphons, hymns, and vigils first began to be celebrated in the church of Milan. And dedication to the practice endures to the present day, not only in the same church, but throughout virtually every province of the west'.⁴⁹ His use of the term *antiphona* aside, the central point of Paulinus' passage confirms the impression created by Augustine, Niceta and Ambrose. We have it from him explicitly that vigils at which singing was prominent were first celebrated in the West at the time in question. As for the appearance of the word 'antiphons', it should come as no surprise in a document from the early fifth century. By this time, it was customary to use the term in virtually every passage that mentioned extended psalm singing, particularly in monastic rules, where references to 'antiphons', 'psalms' and 'responses' meant, apparently, that psalms were sung in a variety of ways, including the traditional responsorial and the newer antiphonal manners.⁵⁰ Whether Paulinus, writing some 35 years after the fact, was accurate or not in his inclusion of antiphonal psalmody on that night in Milan (the chronology fits), this is not relevant to his endorsement of the central point that the psalmodic vigil was a new practice in the West at the time, and that it had since become universally observed.

Finally, one should note the monastic involvement in Ambrose's vigil. Augustine referred to 'the brethren singing zealously together', and Ambrose himself stated that 'we recited psalms with the brethren'. At the same time, we know that the people were present, Augustine's own mother among them; moreover, both Augustine and Paulinus refer to the incident as an event in the musical history of the 'church of Milan', not of an isolated monastic community within the city. It seems very much like the situation at Basil's Caesarea, where the urban monks and nuns were not rigidly cloistered groups chanting their Offices in a remote oratory or enclosed choir; rather, they came from their quarters to participate in the services of the cathedral congregation of which they themselves were members, albeit

⁴⁷ See *MECL*, Nos. 304–11.

⁴⁸ Epistle XX, 24 (*MECL*, No. 292).

⁴⁹ *Vita sancti Ambrosii* 13 (*MECL*, No. 393).

⁵⁰ See, for example, *MECL*, Nos. 252, 349, 390, 396.

privileged ones, distinguished by their lives of asceticism and celibacy. We can assume that they had memorized the Psalter, and can well imagine them carrying the main burden of the psalmody, while the people participated in a variety of ways, whether with refrains, antiphons or the occasional favourite psalm that all knew by heart. The precise degrees of monastic and congregational involvement (not to speak of clerical participation) no doubt varied from one church to the next; the monastic and lay psalmody of Egeria's Jerusalem, for example, might have been less well integrated than that of Basil's Caesarea, while there is no evidence at all of monastic involvement in Niceta's Remesiana. In any event, there is a good deal of circumstantial evidence for the influence of monastic psalmody upon the overall phenomenon of the later fourth-century popular psalmodic vigil, if not upon every instance of it.

The later fourth-century sources display an extraordinary enthusiasm for psalmody, an enthusiasm that must surely be associated with the activities described here, the psalmodic Office and the popular psalmodic vigil. From a purely quantitative point of view, they must have accounted for by far the greater part of the psalm singing to which the population was exposed at the time. This enthusiasm is expressed in numerous passages from the patristic literature, some of which have been quoted above, but its most striking manifestation is in the extended encomiums of psalmody penned by no fewer than five of the outstanding ecclesiastical figures of the time: Athanasius, Basil, John Chrysostom, Ambrose and Niceta. These remarkable documents share a number of intriguing commonplaces, but the point that is of particular interest here is that they reflect a genuine aesthetic response to the musical attractiveness of psalmody. These authors make no apologies for this, with the exception of Athanasius (a matter of some significance that is dealt with below). It gladdens them that psalms are sung to pleasant melodies and that the faithful are thereby enabled to recall their texts, something they fail to do with other books of the Scriptures. Some music historians have twisted this notion to mean that crafty ecclesiastical figures duped the guileless with the snare of catchy tunes,⁵¹ but the reality was much more positive than that. For example, John Chrysostom writes: 'For nothing so arouses the soul, gives it wing, sets it free from the earth, releases it from the prison of the body, teaches it to love wisdom and to condemn all the things of this life, as concordant melody and sacred song composed in rhythm'.⁵² Similarly, Niceta declares that 'a psalm is sweet to the ear when sung, it penetrates the soul while it gives pleasure, it is easily remembered when sung often, and what the harshness of the Law cannot force from the minds of man it excludes by the suavity of song'.⁵³ Ambrose refers to a psalm as 'a kind of play, productive of more learning than that which is dispensed with stern discipline'.⁵⁴ Finally, Basil exalts the singing of psalms by associating it with charity: 'Thus psalmody provides the greatest of all goods, charity, by devising in its common song a certain bond of unity, and by joining together the people into the concord of a single chorus'.⁵⁵

These passages serve not least to document the very existence of the phenomenon described here as the psalmodic movement. Their chronology is roughly in keeping with the spread of popular psalmodic vigils: they appear moving from east to west

⁵¹ See Hermann Abert, *Die Musikanschauung der Mittelalters und ihre Grundlagen*, Halle, 1905 (repr. Tutzing, 1964), 86–87; and, less pejoratively, Gustave Reese, *Music in the Middle Ages*, New York, 1940, p. 63.

⁵² *In psalmum xli*, 1 (MECL, No. 164).

⁵³ *De psalmodiae bono* 5 (MECL, No. 306).

⁵⁴ *Explanatio psalmi* 1, 9 (MECL, No. 276).

⁵⁵ *Homilia in psalmum i*, 2 (MECL, No. 131).

over a period of a decade or two. Moreover, they give the impression that psalmody had penetrated every facet of Christian life in the later fourth century, that it was at the very centre of Christian piety. Niceta, for example, catalogues what the psalms contribute to ‘the benefit, edification and consolation of the human species of whatever class, sex, or age. The infant has here what he can suckle, the boy what he can cheer, the adolescent that by which he can mend his ways, the young man what he can follow, and the old man material for prayer. A woman learns modesty, orphans find a father, widows a judge, the poor a protector and strangers a guide.’⁵⁶ Similarly, Ambrose writes:

Old men ignore the stiffness of age to sing a psalm . . . young men sing one without the bane of lust . . . young women sing psalms with no loss of wisely decency . . . and the child who refuses to learn other things takes pleasure in contemplating it . . . A psalm is sung by emperors and rejoiced in by the people . . . a psalm is sung at home and repeated outdoors; it is learned without effort and retained with delight.⁵⁷

The tone of such passages is altogether different from those describing the earlier fourth-century psalmody of desert monasticism. Musical pleasure had become an essential feature of psalmody, a development that is further documented by the emergence of a puritanical reaction to it. The majority of important figures were positive on the subject, even warmly so, but some were not. Niceta of Remesiana found it necessary to defend psalmody against those who ‘think it enough if a psalm is spoken in the heart and frivolous if it is produced with the sound of one’s lips’.⁵⁸ Similarly, Augustine concluded that even if there were minor objections to be made against it, ‘a practice ought without hesitation to be maintained, especially when it can be defended from the Scriptures, as can the singing of hymns and psalms’.⁵⁹ Those who objected outright to psalmody were evidently minor figures; their own works have not survived, and we know of their position only from the extant refutations.

There were, however, specific qualifications on the part of some to the general support that the Church Fathers lent to psalmody, notably on the question of whether women ought to sing in church. Isidore of Pelusium (d. c. 435), an Alexandrian monk of singularly severe views, said of women: ‘They do not feel compunction in hearing the divine hymns, but rather misuse the sweetness of melody to arouse passion . . . thus it is necessary . . . that we stop these women from singing in church’.⁶⁰ Jerome, whose extreme views on sexual morality are his least attractive trait, was of the same mind as Isidore. Citing Paul’s teaching that women ought to be silent in church (I Cor. 14: 34–35), he asks: ‘But who does not know that women are to sing psalms in their chambers, away from the company of men and the crowded assembly?’⁶¹ Ambrose, however, speaking for the majority, excludes psalmody from the Pauline stricture: ‘The Apostle admonishes women to be silent in church, yet they do well to join in a psalm: this is gratifying for all ages and fitting for both sexes’.⁶²

It is Jerome, again, who expresses another qualification to the positive orthodoxy

⁵⁶ *De psalmodiae bono* 5 (MECL, No. 305).

⁵⁷ *Explanatio psalmi* i (MECL, No. 276).

⁵⁸ *De psalmodiae bono* 2 (MECL, No. 303).

⁵⁹ Epistle LV, 34 (MECL, No. 377).

⁶⁰ Epistle I, 90 (MECL, No. 121).

⁶¹ *Dialogus contra pelagianos* 1, 25 (MECL, No. 334).

⁶² *Explanatio psalmi* 1, 9 (MECL, No. 276).

of the period; with characteristic gruffness, he dismisses the notion that psalmody need display Niceta's 'suavity of song'. In commenting on St Paul's oft-quoted reference to 'psalms, hymns, and spiritual canticles', he argues: 'Although one might be, as they are wont to say, *kakophonos*, if he has performed good works, he is a sweet singer before God. Thus let the servant of Christ sing, so that not the voice of the singer but the words that are read give pleasure'.⁶³ And on another occasion, he advised the monk Rusticus concerning psalmody at the nocturnal Office: 'When your turn comes you will chant a psalm, in which sweetness of voice is not required but a proper mental disposition'.⁶⁴ Niceta of Remesiana, on the other hand, stated expressly what is implicit in the majority view when he counselled his congregation to sing well and carefully: 'One ought not to drag out the singing while another cuts it short, and one ought not to sing too low while another raises his voice. Rather, each should strive to integrate his voice within the sound of the harmonious chorus'.⁶⁵

Jerome appears to have had one important ally in his disdain for the positive musical effect of psalmody, Athanasius of Alexandria, who, alone of the five authors of Psalter encomiums cited earlier, failed to express the commonplace that it was the melodiousness of psalmody that gave it its special efficacy. Indeed, he explicitly rejected the notion: 'Why are words of this sort sung with melody and song? Some of the simple ones among us, even while believing the texts to be divinely inspired, think that the psalms are sung melodiously for the sake of good sound and the pleasure of the ear. This is not so'.⁶⁶ Still, it is interesting that Athanasius, while a man with something of a puritanical reputation, did not go so far as to reject melodious psalmody. He simply appears to have been uncomfortable with a justification for it that granted positive value to the reaction of the senses, and he developed in its place the quasi-Neoplatonic argument—as one might expect from an Alexandrian—that melody is a 'symbol of the spiritual harmony of the soul'.⁶⁷ He concluded his argument: 'Hence to recite the psalms with melody is not done from a desire for pleasing sound, but it is a manifestation of harmony among the thoughts of the soul. And melodious reading is a sign of the well-ordered and tranquil condition of the mind'.⁶⁸

Finally, Augustine offers a unique perspective on the issue in that famous passage from the *Confessions* where he expresses his scruples over the intense pleasure he experienced in listening to the psalmody in Ambrose's church at Milan: 'How much I wept at your hymns and canticles, deeply moved by the voices of your sweetly singing church. Those voices flowed into my ears, and the truth was poured out in my heart, whence a feeling of piety surged up and my tears ran down. And these things were good for me.' Yet it was a pleasure over which he afterwards experienced considerable feelings of guilt: 'I sin thus in these things unknowingly, but afterwards I know'. Still, he believed this reaction to be too extreme: 'I err by excessive severity, and sometimes so much so that I wish every melody of the sweet songs to which the Davidic Psalter is customarily set, to be banished from my ears and from the church itself'. And for all his vacillation, Augustine's ultimate position was positive: 'However, when I recall the tears which I shed at the song of the Church in the first

⁶³ *Commentarium in epistulam ad Ephesios* III, v, 19 (MECL, No. 333).

⁶⁴ Epistle CXXV, 15 (MECL, No. 328).

⁶⁵ *De psalmodiae bono* 13 (MECL, No. 311).

⁶⁶ *Epistula ad Marcellinum de interpretatione psalmorum* 27 (MECL, No. 98).

⁶⁷ Ibid. 28 (MECL, No. 99).

⁶⁸ Ibid. 29 (MECL, No. 100).

days of my recovered faith . . . I acknowledge again the great benefit of this practice'.⁶⁹ Augustine was perhaps unique in the degree of his musical sensitivity, and certainly unique in his skill at expressing every nuance of his thoughts and feelings. But his position was ultimately conventional: he accepted melodious psalmody—so long as it was not enjoyed *too* much.

These reactions—whether positive or negative—to melodious psalmody merit two observations. First, the sources that illustrate it display by and large the same chronology as those telling of the psalmodic vigil as it moved from Basil's Caesarea to Ambrose's Milan. They help to confirm the impression that the psalmodic movement was in full flood by the later 370s in the East and about a decade later in the West. The second observation is that monastic psalmody, simple and austere in its desert cradle, was musically transformed in its later fourth-century urban environment. As we have seen, the psalmody that Basil, John Chrysostom and Ambrose eulogized, and the psalmody that caused Augustine to weep, was one in which urban monks and nuns participated and, indeed, played a leading role. One could say that, with its continuous psalmody, monasticism made a quantitative contribution to the song of the fourth-century church, and received in exchange the gift of musicality.

To speak of a later fourth-century psalmodic movement is certainly not to suggest that Christian psalmody was an innovation of the time. The New Testament had already evinced a warm receptivity to religious song;⁷⁰ and there is a pattern of third-century evidence suggesting that the singing both of newly-composed hymns and of biblical psalms was a frequent occurrence at communal evening meals.⁷¹ As we have seen, after the emancipation of the Church by Constantine in 313, public morning and evening services were established in which selected psalms, canticles and hymns figured prominently. The contribution of monasticism came later in the century when the practice of continuous psalmody was brought to the Church at large by the urban monks and nuns. In the closing decades of the fourth century, the Church appears to have been caught up in an unprecedented wave of enthusiasm for psalmody. The cathedral Office was awash in it: the people came to church to sing and pray for hours on Sundays before the early morning Eucharist; the principal ecclesiastical figures of the day praised the singing of psalms in the most extravagant terms; and a disgruntled minority murmured their disapproval.

Psalmody in the celebration of the Eucharist, not yet mentioned here, is another important development of the fourth century; it came to be employed at two places in the service, during the pre-Eucharistic readings and during the distribution of the Eucharistic elements. The latter, the Communion psalm, appears to have been earlier by a few decades—it was in place perhaps by the mid fourth century—and to have displayed a character and origin different from the psalmody of the Readings.⁷²

⁶⁹ *Confessions* X, xxxiii, 59–50 (*MECL*, No. 352).

⁷⁰ See *MECL*, Nos. 3–17.

⁷¹ See James W. McKinnon, 'The Fourth-Century Origin of the Gradual', *Early Music History*, vii (1987), 91–106, at pp. 93–95.

⁷² For patristic references to the Communion psalm, see *MECL*, Nos. 158, 172, 235, 266, 331, 385. The date of the first of these, the presumed earliest, is in dispute; the reference appears in the *Mystagogical Catecheses*, a work traditionally attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem and dated c. 350 but claimed by some scholars to have been written by his successor, John of Jerusalem, bishop from 387 to 417. If this is correct, the earliest surviving reference to the Communion are from the 380s, roughly contemporary with the earliest references to the gradual psalm. Even in the absence of earlier extant sources, however, one might wish to argue for the priority of the Communion psalm on the very grounds of its character as described here.

We are accustomed to think of the Communion as an item of the Mass Proper, but originally it resembled more an item of the Ordinary. In most localities, the same psalm was sung, Psalm 33, with its appropriate eighth verse, ‘Taste and see that the Lord is sweet’, functioning as a congregational refrain. It thus has the look and feel of the selective psalmody of the cathedral Office and seems to have originated independently of, and indeed before, our psalmodic movement.

The psalmody of the Readings is a different matter; it appears to have originated later than the Communion psalm, perhaps by two or three decades, and to have been motivated, at least in part, by musical considerations.⁷³ The most plausible explanation for its existence is that it developed from the occasional use of psalms as Old Testament readings into an obligatory responsorial psalm sung between the Epistle and the Gospel. In most localities, only one psalm was sung, the predecessor of the Western gradual and Byzantine *prokeimenon*, but in Jerusalem an alleluia psalm was sung as well. The transformation of the gradual and alleluia psalms from occasional readings to indispensable musical items, taking place as it did during the very time of the psalmodic movement (the closing decades of the fourth century), seems good grounds to associate it with the movement.

To return, finally, to the proposition that monastic psalmody made an essential contribution to the psalmodic movement, it must be said that to argue for it is not to claim that monasticism was the only causal factor involved, nor even that it was the single most important one. An equally strong case could be made for the emancipation of the Church in 313. The previously persecuted Church became a Church Triumphant in the course of the fourth century, a development inevitably reflected in its liturgy. We sense this already in the richly hieratic language of Eusebius’ (d. c. 340) *Ecclesiastical History*:

Yea, verily, the unblemished rites [were conducted] by the leaders, and the services and godly ordinances of the Church [were fulfilled] by our priests—here with psalmody and other utterances of the voices which speak to us from God—there with the accomplishment of sacred and mystical ministrations.⁷⁴

Similarly, the very architectural setting of the fourth-century liturgy must have contributed to musical development, as the modest domestic meeting rooms of the early Church were replaced almost overnight by great stone basilicas, a virtual architectural revolution enthusiastically fostered by Constantine himself.⁷⁵ These new buildings would seem to have required the enhancement of ecclesiastical song both for practical acoustical considerations and for considerations of aesthetic congruity. There are also less tangible factors, in particular the highly-charged religious emotionalism of the period that I have neither the learning nor the imagination to summarize adequately. One gains some small sense of it, however, in observing the origins of so-called antiphonal psalmody. What antiphonal psalmody was in a concrete descriptive sense remains a puzzle for music historians,⁷⁶ but there is no

⁷³ See McKinnon, ‘The Fourth-Century Origin of the Gradual’.

⁷⁴ *Ecclesiastical History* X, iii, 3 (MECL, No. 213). On the general impact on the fourth-century liturgy of the alliance of Church and Empire, see, for example, Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, rev. edn., New York, 1982, pp. 304–19. Johannes Quasten seeks to minimize the impact: see *The Early Liturgy*, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1959, pp. 122–33.

⁷⁵ See Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 4th edn., Harmondsworth, 1986, pp. 39–92.

⁷⁶ The conventional notion that the antiphonal psalmody of the patristic period is to be equated with psalmody sung by two choirs in alternation is at best a gross simplification, not borne out by the sources. Two scholars who have made some progress towards a satisfactory explanation of its original nature are Helmut Hucke (*Die Entwick-*

mistaking the atmosphere surrounding its early history, as Arian partisans went about the cities at night hymning antiphonally, to be met on subsequent nights by the orthodox bearing silver crosses and wax tapers, and singing their rival Christian antiphons. However antiphonal psalmody is to be defined, it was clearly an urban and popular phenomenon, one that monasticism borrowed from the general Christian community rather than the reverse. One can well imagine some sort of psalmodic movement taking place in the later fourth century without the monastic contribution, but it would have been quite different from the one that we know; we would somehow have to visualize it without the flooding of the cathedral Office with continuous psalmody and without the rise of the popular psalmodic vigil.

lung des frühchristlichen Kultgesangs zum gregorianischen Gesang', *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte*, xlvi (1953), 153–71) and Helmut Leeb (*Die Psalmodie bei Ambrosius* ('Wiener Beiträge zur Theologie', xviii), Vienna, 1967, pp. 18–23). Most recently, Edward Nowacki has brought great diligence and insight to the question in 'Antiphonal Psalmody in Christian Antiquity and Early Middle Ages', to appear in a forthcoming Festschrift for David Hughes, and in 'Antiphona' for the impending second edition of *MGG*. I am grateful to Professor Nowacki for generously sharing these publications with me in typescript.